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Waltz Themes in String Quartets by D. Shostakovich: Semantic Aspect

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Genre is an essential source of musical semantics. The reliance upon the melodic and rhythmic expressions of some popular genres, composing the reality of Shostakovich's contemporary music environment, is quite evident in the composer's musical language. The analysis of the composer's methods of work with the song and dance genre models, specific actualization of the typical features of such primary genres help the researchers understand the specificity of his composition world. The present article discusses the themes of quartets by D. Shostakovich originating from the genre of waltz.

Keywords: D. Shostakovich, quartets, genre, waltz.

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The genre origins of the themes used in quartets by D. Shostakovich are very diverse. In the fifteen chamber instrumental cycles composed within the period from the year 1938 to 1974, there are some musical themes based both on the academic and popular genres widely spread in the Soviet Union. The composer actualizes various types of marches, songs and dances. Some of them act as ways to characterize the protagonist (such as songs, lyrical songs and arias), and others are used to describe the characters from the Outer world (marches, dances, waltzes, scherzos).

The present article is dedicated to the study of the themes used in string quartets by D. Shostakovich and revealing the genre model of waltz. Its distinctive features are: triple meter,

repetitive rhythmic and melodic expressions caused by the specificity of the dance steps, the typical structural formula of the accompaniment: bass and two chords, structural regularity. The waltz themes in the quartets are played, mostly, in agile tempos (Moderato, Moderato con moto, Allegretto, Allegro molto). The typical waltz figures, such as whirling and waltz step, are reflected in the melodic pattern by means of combining and repeating the simplest intonation elements (scale-wise and triad melodic elements, short two- and three-voice motives).

Most frequently the waltz themes are introduced in parts III¹ and II² of the quartets; less frequently they appear in parts I³ and quartet finals⁴. They are predominantly found in the

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primary⁵ or secondary areas⁶, and less frequently in the main⁷ or middle parts of the ternary forms⁸, and once – in the final area⁹.

With all the visibility of the genre prototype, the composer's work with the standard genre tool set is always different, in each case forming the limits of the possible conceptual and figurative interpretation.

Sometimes D. Shostakovich resorts to waltzes in his quartets in the festive and lyrical manner, typical of the Soviet time (the primary area of the IV part of the Sixth quartet). The great number of such examples expressing merry and cheerful mood can be found in cantatas, oratorios, movie soundtracks by various authors of the same historical period. To express such a mood, the composers used agile tempos, major key, genre alloy of dance and song. An example of such a song-waltz in the quartets is the theme of the primary area of part IV (final) of the Sixth quartet (mark 64-68 *Allegretto*). It is characterized with objectivity or even some constraint which is caused by the dance character and subdued dynamics. Despite the absence of the typical accompaniment pattern, the genre model of the waltz is quite distinctive due to its triple meter, repetitive rhythmic patterns ♩ ♩ and ♩ ♩♩, the whirling motives and the drone of fifths in the accompaniment (EXAMPLE 1).

This agile and light melody reveals a strong lyrical component, as its another genre source is a popular lyrical song. The song character of the motive reveals itself in the plasticity of the

melody and the reliance on the repetitive diatonic “formula” motives, in the overt or covert motion of the melody along the chord tones (falling mostly on the strong beat of the measure) and in the presence of “chanted” large-distance steps: a fourth, a fifth, an eighth. The actualization of the song and dance genre model determines the dominance of symmetric syntactic formations, the significance of internal regularity in the ternary form of the main area (with the flexible variation of the phrase scale).

In a series of quartets the waltz genre model obtains a specific shape and serves to create some “puppet-like” ballet figures. Here we speak of the primary area of part III of the First, part II of the Third, part III of the Fifth, parts I and II of the Sixth, secondary areas of parts I and IV of the First, part II of the Third, part III of the Second, the primary area and the medium part theme of the Thirteen, the theme of the medium part of Part III of the Fourteenth quartet. On one hand, their external features are actualized by means of the motoric and dance-like moves, and on the other hand, to create an image of a puppet or toy character the composer turns to the timbre specificity, the subtleness of the stroke (frequently interchanging *legato* and *staccato*) and dynamics (the contrast of *forte* and *piano*, unexpected *sf*), lighter and easier structure. Such themes are usually described by harmonic stability and structural regularity.

The features typical of the “puppet character” are fragility, diminutiveness (also referred to by

EXAMPLE 1

Квартет № 6, ч. IV
a tempo 64

V. Valkova as “subtlety” [Valkova, 2004: 124]) conveyed in the quartets by means of the melody in the violin timber (as a rule, in the first violin part¹⁰), predominantly in the high or medium range.

Another feature of the “puppet” themes is the rigidity of moves typical of a windup toy, revealing itself through the symmetry of motives in the melody, the sequences and repetitiveness of the motive elements.

In these quartet themes the “light dancing puppet” effect is achieved by the dominance of the brisk articulation (*staccato*) and distinctiveness, transparency of the structure, presenting the harmonic functions in the ultimately minimalistic way as “reduced” to two voices (see EXAMPLE 2 – the primary area of part II of the Third quartet, EXAMPLE 3 – the primary area of part II of the Sixth quartet).

In the blistering whirling theme of the primary area of part II of the Third quartet some rigidity of the dance formulas (“runs”, “whirls”, “waltz step”) are combined with the fragile lyrical intonations. In the process of variations of the

main melody, the concentration of the lamenting half-step and half-third motives increases.

In the primary area of part II of the Sixth quartet laid mostly with the quarter- and eighth-notes the distinctive waltz accompaniment is absent, and the key base is sophisticated with some step mutations (in the primary *Es-dur* key).

In some of the “puppet” themes the typical waltz formula of “bass + two chords” finds an original transformation in the melodic voice or the accompaniment party, as illustrated by the secondary area of part I of the First quartet (EXAMPLE 4).

The idea of “drawing a portrait” of a puppet character determines the peculiarities of the exposition parts. Thus, the automatism, regularity of the windup toy-puppet moves are projected on the structure of the themes. Generally, it relies on the square structures, finds the emphasized repetition principle that leads to the appearance of some rondo-like and repetitive forms with certain specific solutions¹¹.

EXAMPLE 2



EXAMPLE 3



EXAMPLE 4

Knapret № 1, st. I

The musical score is for 'Knapret № 1, st. I'. It consists of two systems of music. The first system has a violin part (top staff) starting with a *pp* dynamic and a *f espress.* dynamic, and a cello/bass part (bottom staff) starting with a *f* dynamic and a *pp* dynamic. The second system has a violin part (top staff) starting with a *p cresc.* dynamic and a *f* dynamic, and a cello/bass part (bottom staff) starting with a *p cresc.* dynamic and a *f* dynamic. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

In some waltz themes of the subgroup (secondary area of part III of the Second quartet, secondary area of part II of the Third quartet and the medium part theme of part III of the Fourteenth quartet) the features of different characters are so closely intertwined that it is impossible to identify, what is being described: a ballerina or a dancing puppet.

Another way for the composer to turn to the waltz genre is the themes we call the “gloomy waltzes”. This name is explained by the special type of their emotional atmosphere: disharmonious, internally unstable and restless, that caused the name.

This group includes the themes of the main (mark 50-57) and final parts of part III of the Second quartet (mark 63-65), the refrain of part V of the Third quartet (mark 85-90), the secondary part of part III of the Fifth quartet (mark 90-95), the medium part of the first and the last parts of part II of the Sixth quartet, the material that appears in the mark 41-45, 48-49 of part III of the Seventh quartet, the Trio theme of part III of the Eighth quartet (mark 44-45).

Some of the listed themes are unwound to a large scale, such as the theme of the main part in part III of the Second quartet, the refrain of part V of the Third quartet, the secondary part

of part III of the Fifth quartet; some of them are laconic, such as the final theme of part III of the Second quartet and the Trio theme of part III of the Eighth quartet.

The genre nature of the waltz determined the reliance of the exposition themes on the periodic regular structures. Thus, the main area of part III of the Second quartet and the secondary area of part III of the Fifth quartet are composed in the ternary form, while the final part of part III of the Second quartet, the refrain of part V of the Third quartet and the Trio theme of part III of the Eighth quartet are organized according to the repetitive structure principle; the theme played between mark 41-45 of part III of the Seventh quartet is a four-phrase period.

They can be united into a special subgroup due to the distinctive set of expressive musical means that even includes the phonic level: the integrity of the general music tone.

As a result of predominance of the middle or low range, the timber and tessitura conditions determine the selection of the instrument: the low tessitura of the violin, viola or cello. The textural organization of the themes is homophonic and harmonic: the melody is assigned to one leading instrument (the exception is the middle range theme of the simple ternary form of part II of the

Sixth quartet where the waltz theme sounds in octaves, in the cello and viola parts).

All themes of the subgroup are characterized with harmonic instability, subdued or wave-like dynamics. The melodies are smooth and cohesive, which is caused by the legato stroke. In the mentioned themes chromaticization of the melody is combined with generalized intonations.

Each of the themes sounds in quite an agile tempo (the main and the final themes of part III of the Second quartet – *Allegro*; the refrain of part V of the Third quartet and the middle part theme of part II of the Sixth quartet – *Moderato*; the secondary area of part III of the Fifth quartet, the themes of part III of the Seventh quartet in mark 41-45 and 48-49, Trio theme of part III of the Eighth quartet – *Allegretto*). Due to the general peculiarities of the meter, the metric unit of the pieces is the total note value of the measure. Under such conditions the melodies built in the fourth- and eighth-notes sound especially weightless and get involved in the general eternal motion. It creates the impression of a certain constraint of expression or even alienation of some sort.

The internal tension, the restlessness is conveyed through the intonation structure of the winding chromatic melody line, playing around the sharp steps hiding a diminished fourth triton and, in the Second quartet, an augmented second, a diminished third. In the musical canvas a great significance is gained by various ostinato figures reflecting the idea of remaining in the

same condition, absorption in this state, or even some psychological retardation, or obsession. It is especially distinctive in the final part of part III of the Second quartet (EXAMPLE 5). The underlying melodic tones framing the diminished fourth and diminished fifth intervals create an exquisite ambience accompanied with the emotional condition of restlessness and bad expectations.

In this subgroup, a specific expressive role is assigned to the “deep” minor key colours: the theme in the mark 41-45 of part III of the Seventh quartet is in *fis-moll*; the Trio theme of part III of the Eighth quartet is in Locrian *h mode* and in the other cases the composer turns to the flat keys with a big number of signs (the main area of part III of the Second quartet, mark 50-57, is composed in *es-moll*, the final area of the same part, mark 63-65, is in *b-moll*; the refrain of part V of the Third quartet, mark 85-90, is in *F-dur/moll*, and the secondary party of part III of the Fifth quartet, mark 90-95, is in *Des-dur/moll*; the middle part theme of part II of the Sixth quartet is in *B-dur/moll*). For this reason the sound of the themes has a specific colouring: dim, gloomy, sad and sullen. In some cases it is aggravated with some specific articulation techniques. Thus, the main area theme of part III of the Second quartet (EXAMPLE 6) is played *piano* by cello with a muffler. The subdued melody relies on the motives played around the diminished triad, which together with the performance technique

EXAMPLE 5

Квартет № 2, ч. III
68

(*con sordino*) assigns a specific exquisite character to the theme.

The main theme (refrain) of part V of the Third quartet (EXAMPLE 7) is also played quietly (*pianissimo*) by cello, as the previous one:

First the theme is led by cello without touching any tones higher than small octave g. Against this background, there are some short viola pizzicato motives based on such intervals as the eighth, diminished fifth, fourth, and including the open string c. The image created by the initial theme can be defined as gloomy, mysterious and ghostly.

In the theme development process there appear three variations. The first (mark 85) and the second (mark 86) ones, due to the textural solution (low range) and quiet dynamics are perceived and one and the same development stage. Its distinctive feature is subdued “background-like” sound. The general properties of the first and the

second variations are the intervention of vocal intonations maintaining some motoric move. The aspiration of the form to the third variation makes the first two sound as an introduction. The third variation (mark 87) sounds the brightest due to the textural and instrumental solution: the theme is played by the first violin. The melody concentrates the lamenting minor third intonations and the diminished fourth step that bears some mourning semantics, while the *catabasis* figure introduced in the second violin and viola parts in the measures 63-69 to emphasize the general musical shape. The composer includes his monogram into the musical pattern (measures 47-49: the viola part plays the consequence of *Es-C-H* – EXAMPLE 8).

In two lower instrument parts, in the middle part of the simple ternary form of part II of the Sixth quartet (mark 38-39, EXAMPLE 9), in the ostinato pulsation of the violin chords there sounds a theme where the “whirling” waltz

EXAMPLE 6

Квартет № 2, ч. III
Allegro $\text{♩} = 104$
con sord.

50 *pp*
con sord.
pp
p espress.

EXAMPLE 7

Квартет № 3, ч. V
Moderato $\text{♩} = 100$
pizz.

85 *pp*

motives are combined with the special plasticity of the wave-like melodic pattern. The rigidity of the move enhanced by the strict structural organization becomes the determining property of both textural layers (the separation is emphasized by means of instrumentation). However, along with the “straightened” scale-like motives, the melody involves some motives including the diminished fourth and for a moment revealing the lyrical mode. It is worthwhile noticing such property of the theme as aspiration, created by the ascending move in the moderately fast tempo and the pulsating accompaniment pattern. Along with that, the introduction of the parallel key with the flattened 5th degree (forming a motive with

a diminished fifth repeated twice) for a moment makes the melody sound internally tense and pinching.

The secondary part theme of part III of the Fifth quartet (EXAMPLE 10) is first displayed *pianissimo* in the low range of the first violin part. The peculiarities of the theme are: rhythmical straightness, smooth “swinging” melodic pattern, complicated key structure and textural organization (the leading voice of the first violin against the background of the extended tones in the other instruments’ parts). The secondary theme of the final begins in *Des-dur*, with the high level of all voices’ chromaticization causing the exquisiteness of the key colouring (the blinking major-minor tones: *Des-dur/moll*), bringing the

EXAMPLE 8

Knapier № 3, ч. V
Moderato

EXAMPLE 9

Knapier № 6, ч. II

gloominess and internal instability to the general image.

In mark 41-45 (EXAMPLE 11) and 48-49 of part III of the Seventh quartet the leading first violin *con sordino* comes across a theme that is, intonationally, a sort of genre transformation of the III part fugue but rhythmically amplified. Let us remark the intonational connection of the theme with the second element of part I primary area, supported by the introduction of the “call-like” rhythmic formula into the second violin part.

The waltz base is revealed through its triple meter, whirling motives in the melody and also a specifically transformed accompaniment formula: a chord falling on the second weak beat. In the measures 189-192 the monogram theme tone combination is introduced into the first violin part¹², and in mark 45 in the three parts of the quartet appears the *catabasis* (viola and second violin in the volume of a third, and the cello – in the diminished fourth – *F-E-D-Cis*).

Besides that, the “wilting” fourth intonations within phrases draw attention, bringing up associations with music by Tchaikovsky, and the theme from the III part of the Second quartet in particular.

The theme of the middle part of part III of the Eighth quartet (Trio, marks 44-45, EXAMPLE 12) sounds like all the other themes of the studied subgroups: in the quiet dynamics (*pp*). The melody is played in the high pitch of cello, making the theme sound tense and desperate. The lyrical image of the theme is created with the intonation, including the “calling” thirds. At certain moments (see measures 157-161, 173-176) the diminished quarter steps form some tones of the monogram theme (as *H-C-D-Es*, *Es-D-H*), forming the author’s signature. The gloomy character of the trio is created through the type of accompaniment (first and second violin) “sliding” by half-tones in a wavy manner in parallel consonances (perfect fifths) by diminished fifths. We should also remark that

EXAMPLE 10



EXAMPLE 11



EXAMPLE 12

Allegretto $\text{♩} = 120$ Квартет № 8. Сопр. 110. III часть

the two top parts of the quartet form a chromatic scale bringing the exquisiteness and unusualness of the theme. Generally, the creation of such effect can be done by means of the multiple key use (unification of several keys) as it combines the two: the Locrian (based on the diminished triad) in the melody and the artificial one in the accompaniment part.

The general tendency of the “gloomy waltzes” thematic patterns development is their fading out into the common sound form. The initial figurative properties of the themes, such as restlessness and anxiety grow deeper due to the intonational tension and harmonic instability.

Despite the agile tempos and the selected dance-like model, it would be wrong to interpret this subgroup themes as genre sketches reflecting the real world events. The generalized intonation type, the constraint and indirectness of the narration does not let us classify them to the Protagonist sphere. In this situation, just like in the case studied in the article by A. Mishchuk, “Through his pieces, the artist attempts to convey his conscious materialized expression of his world view, reflecting the surrounding reality”

[Mishchuk, 2014: 14]. As a result, in the analysed quartet themes there forms a sophisticated combination of the protagonist world and the outer world images, conveyed through the prism of his perception. The idea of conveying the outer world model perceived through the protagonist consciousness is confirmed by the monogram tones introduced into the melody.

The expressed idea indicates the intermediate location of the mentioned themes on the Outer world – Protagonist “coordinate axis”. In the themes, the objective reality is demonstrated with some constraint, through the prism of subjective perception, deflection through the consciousness that rejects the hostile, the alien, when the real seems unreal.

Thus, the analysis of the waltz themes presented in the quartets by D. Shostakovich leads us to the following conclusions. Actualizing the waltz model, the composer brings a certain emotional state (festive when selecting the song-waltz genre model and restless in the “gloomy” waltzes) or a character (a sketch of a puppet, a portrait of a ballerina, a scene with several characters) to life. All waltz themes of the quartets are characterized with some rigidity

that reveals itself on various levels. Its features are: the symmetry of the melodic patters, the motive sequences¹³ along with the accurate and varied repetitions, repetition of the elementary rhythmic formulas, the presence of some ostinato figures in the accompaniment, regularity of the

syntactic structure, regular repetition of various small phrases. The original feature of waltz in the quartets is the paradoxical combination of grace with rigidity, rhythmical exquisiteness with the emphasized regularity of the fourth-note moves in the triple meter organizing the “waltz step”.

¹ In quartets No. 1, 2, 5, 7, 8, 14.

² In the Third and Sixth quartets.

³ In the First and Twelfth quartets.

⁴ Part IV of the First and the Sixth, part V of the Third quartet.

⁵ Part II of the Third and the Sixth; part III of the First, the Second and the Fifth; part IV of the Sixth quartet.

⁶ Part I of the First, part II of the Third, part III of the Second and the Fifth, part IV of the First, the secondary area of part I of the Twelfth quartet.

⁷ Refrain of part V of the Third; primary area of part III of the Eighth; the secondary area of the Thirteenth quartet.

⁸ In part II of the Sixth, part III of the Eighth and the Fourteenth quartet.

⁹ In part III of the Second quartet.

¹⁰ Sometimes the solo is played by the second violin, viola or cello.

¹¹ For instance, the structure of the secondary part of part I of the First quartet is sophisticated period of repetitive structure with an introduction and an annex. On the thematic organization level one may notice the rondo-like figure: the conventional refrain function is performed by the typical accompaniment pattern with glissando that comes to the fore in the introduction and the first four measures of the first phrase, in the first four measures of the third phrase and in the four-measure annex. The primary area of part III of the First quartet is built on the rondo principles. It is revealed, first of all, in the exposition period of the three-phrase repetitive structure. The material of the middle part as it is looks random, as it finds some common features with the initial theme (distinctive eighth-note pulse, quintile figure in the melody, and appearance of some certain motives and the concluding octave-scale glissando). Due to this fact, it is seen ambiguous from the functional point of view, manifesting some features of the main theme variation and, consequently, creating the rondo-like effect. The main theme of part II of the Sixth quartet is organized in the following way: the initial structure similar to that of the refrain is evident in the repetitive two-phrase period.

¹² The melody finds similarity with the motive from part II, see measure 11.

¹³ As we know, sequences are not typical of D. Shostakovich's melodies,

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Вальсовый тематизм в струнных квартетах Д. Шостаковича: семантический аспект

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Жанр – важнейший источник музыкальной семантики. В музыкальном языке Д.Д. Шостаковича весьма ощутима опора на мелодические и ритмические обороты популярных массово-бытовых жанров, составляющих реалии музыкальной среды его времени. Анализ способов работы композитора с песенно-танцевальными жанровыми моделями, особого претворения характерных признаков первичных жанров позволяет приблизиться к пониманию специфики художественного мира его музыкальных произведений. В данной статье рассматриваются темы квартетов Д.Д. Шостаковича, жанровым истоком которых выступает вальс.

Ключевые слова: Д.Д. Шостакович, квартеты, жанр, вальс.

Научная специальность: 24.00.00 – культурология.
